

MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church & Society REPORT

Report 20

June-July, 1978

FOCUS ON BLACK WOMEN AND THE CHURCH

ON WOMEN: BLACK AND MENNONITE

Traditionally, black women have shared a myriad of experiences. They were brought to these shores in physical bondage. Since that time they have continued to struggle for freedom from many types of bondage, except the relegation to being solely a housewife and mother. This has not been the black woman's situation because she has always had to combine her role as housewife and mother with her necessary role as wage earner, either because she was a single parent or because her black man was unable to earn a sufficient salary in our racist society, if indeed he was able to obtain work at all. The black woman has always been a tower of strength, beginning during slavery when the family unit was completely destroyed and she learned to endure without the support of loved ones at her side. Thus she developed strength and endurance as the black male was being emasculated. Many commentators have noted that no other women on earth have done with so few material resources. From Harriet Tubman to Rosa Parks, black women have been in the forefront of the struggle for freedom. From Phyllis Wheatley to Gwendolyn Brooks black women have set new goals in arts and culture. A throng of nameless and unsung heroines of ten thousand kitchens, churches and classrooms have shown black women as the institutional anchor of the black community. Although black women still face serious obstacles, they are no longer confined to domestic work and clerical jobs. However, they still head 60% of all black families. They are still misunderstood and maligned even by their own race. They still suffer from serious social and psychological hazards. They remain a controversial entity. Despite the fact that few have achieved high success in society many are still entrenched in a cycle of poverty.

It was with these and more commonalities of background that 90 black women came together amid the riotous fall foliage at Camp Hebron, Halifax, Pa., October, 1977. Culminating a dream shared by Marge Allen and Frances Jackson, it was the result of more than six months of planning. Financed by funds solicited from Lancaster and Franconia Conferences and the Black Caucus Assembly, the women received travel expenses for the conference. The black women were representatives of black and integrated churches from Los Angeles to Philadelphia, Pa., and Connecticut to Florida. They represented predominantly urban congregations.

There were shouts of greeting and spontaneous hugs of affection as friends met again and anew. One positive social characteristic of black people is their ability to relate and fellowship freely without hesitation.

The theme of the conference was "Challenges Facing Black Mennonite Women Today." Speaker Eunice Bass Gilchrist, pastor's wife, mother, and nurse from Richmond spoke

on the "Emotional Perspective." She prompted us to "look in the mirror to see who we are. We must first of all like ourselves before we can expect to appeal to others. As blacks we have not always felt good about ourselves."

Sharon Fuller, a college senior from St. Louis, Missouri, spoke on "The Social Perspective." She told of some social and educational experiences she was subjected to at a Mennonite College, especially those that portrayed racist attitudes and a non-awareness of the cultural preferences of others. She urged some action on the part of the black and integrated churches to achieve greater acceptance and understanding of minorities in the social and educational areas of the Mennonite church.

Nancy Cash, pastor's wife, mother and teacher from Los Angeles, California, teaching at Eastern Mennonite High School, Harrisonburg, Virginia for one year, spoke to us on "The Spiritual Perspective." She reminded us of the challenge of being Godly women even in today's world of conflicts and factions.

She cited a number of examples of Biblical women and how they coped with their problems and trials. She exhorted mothers to take their children to the altar and put them in God's care. She told of her experiences of being a token black in educational circles where she learned to depend and trust in God to use her to accomplish His will and keep her humble.

Florence Grimes gave a testimony entitled, "How It Was, How It Is." She shared experiences from the past and present in the Mennonite church. Florence a second generation black Mennonite, gave an overview of the past 30 years. Significant in her presentation was the problem of finding acceptable male companionship and marriage partners in a church that is predominately white and where black men are even more scarce than in secular society (where black women outnumber them by one million.)

The cement that kept the conference together was the soulful black gospel selections of Dorothy Harding, Saginaw, Michigan and the

old and contemporary presentations of Sylvia Dyson, Los Angeles, California. The congregational singing led by Irene Crumbley, Tampa, Florida was also spirited and joyous. Musically speaking our preferences were definitely in the traditional black church style. Our appetites were richly filled by the above mentioned sisters.

The final address was presented by Egla Birmingham, a drama professor at Hesston College, Hesston, Kansas. She shared some areas of hurt that she had received professionally, by experiencing double jeopardy being black and female. She urged us to love and fight for freedom from oppression at the same time.

After each presentation there were periods of lively discussion. Issues and points of interest were quite diverse, such as: Single parents and their responsibility; a large number of women and families with unsaved children and spouses; the lack of Christian companionship of the opposite sex for black Mennonite women in light of the black male shortage, and the incidence of inter-racial marriage within the Mennonite church; Christian education in Mennonite schools versus other alternatives for our black Mennonite youth; and many more issues showing just how much a conference of this kind was needed.

Most women rated the conference as very good to excellent and expressed a desire for further conferences of this kind.

When speaking to mature black Mennonite Christian women, it was evident that there are many more opportunities available to blacks than previously. But there are many areas still needing reconciliation. Younger women are slower to see positive attributes in our relationship to the Mennonite church.

In this cosmopolitan advanced technical age it is evident a number of our constituents do not know how their brothers and sisters think and feel. Perhaps the next decade will serve to brighten the awareness of each of us. That is the

mandate that was given to black Mennonite women at their conference.

Mattie L. Cooper, Philadelphia, Pa.

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BLACK WOMEN AND THE CHURCH

Most black Mennonite women are associated with the (Old) Mennonite Church, the Menno-nite conference which has been most actively inclusive of black Christians. A few women such as Margaret Allen who serves on the MCC Peace Section and Evelyn Brown, member of the Mennonite Church Board of Congregational Ministries, serve on predominantly white, male boards.

A number of women are active in the Black Caucus, a fellowship of black and integrated Christians of the Mennonite Church assembled together as a body or through delegates representing the "black constituency" of the church as a whole. The Black Caucus functions as an advisory body to the Mennonite Church agencies, program boards, conferences and inter-Mennonite organizations. There are 45 or more churches affiliated with the Black Caucus. The churches are mainly located in an urban setting ranging from New York to California and Florida to Michigan.

The Black Caucus has an executive body called the Black Council which functions on its behalf throughout the year between its assemblies. This year, reports Dwight McFadden, Jr. from the Office of Black Concerns, three women and five men are serving as the Black Council. Two of the three women are chairpersons of two of the three sub-committees of the Black Council.

"Women in the Mennonite black church and caucus are well represented and have a strong voice in the work," McFadden says. "The black women of the Mennonite church are organizing themselves to function and deal with the problems of being black women in a white church. The Mennonite Black Women's Conference like the one held at Camp Hebron in October 1977 will occur again to continue to deal with problems and bring about continued growth and work at specific areas of concern."

BLACK WOMEN AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The following articles were written in response to the question, "Is feminism an issue for black Mennonite women? Why or why not?"

The question of whether or not feminism is an issue for black women is being asked quite a bit these days. My response to the question does not change when the word "Mennonite" is inserted. Being a black woman in America, some of the issues often-times affect me with little or no relevance to the fact that I'm also a Mennonite. Therefore I will deal with this question from the perspective of black women in general.

Historically black people in America have been regarded as second class citizens and treated as such. The black woman held a position of the very lowest social strata. During slavery her attention was divided between her family and that of the "master's." Post slavery many black women could still be found working in the white man's kitchen and taking care of his children while her own were left at home to fend for themselves. Of course this was not by choice, rather it was for the few pennies, old clothes and scraps of food she was given that would go to her children. Not only were the black people deprived but the black woman suffered much humiliation by having to succumb to the desires of the white male.

With the advent of the early women's movement one would think this would provide an opportunity for the black woman to align with her white sisters and fight together for some of the rights both had been denied. However because of racism and ignorance the early women's movement was not yet ready to accept the support of the black woman.

It was not until the development of the civil rights movement that both black men and women were able to struggle for the most basic human rights they had been denied since their exportation to the United States. During the '60's which was the height of the civil rights movement, black people were trying to get into

decent schools, neighborhoods and secure jobs that paid according to skill and ability, not color. The women's movement was also at its peak during the 60's but not many black women were involved. This was due primarily to the fact that many women's concerns were not pertinent to black women. White women did not have difficulty getting into colleges or moving into neighborhoods of their choice. They could go into the south and sit down at any restaurant and receive a meal with no hassles. So the women's movement during the 60's dealt with issues such as child care, sex discrimination, etc. It was basically oriented towards the white middle class woman. Many black women were already involved in the struggle for rights and privileges that white women had. Black women generally saw no relevance or need to get involved in the women's movement. This has usually been a personal choice rather than a reflection on the majority of black women.

Presently black people are becoming increasingly concerned over losing some of the advances and gains won during the 60's. Financial assistance is becoming more difficult for minority students to receive, the Bakke decision is pending and many schools in the black community are still in desperate need of upgrading. Discrimination is still taking place on the job scene and in other aspects of our lives. Racism is still here. There has been a noticeable resurgence of extreme right wing groups. Here in St. Louis, the K.K.K. is constantly trying to increase its strength through public appearances, etc. The Mennonite church itself has been guilty of suppressing women also. It encourages neither black nor white women to participate in the hierarchy of the church. They attempt to justify this conservative thinking by distorting and misinterpreting the scriptures.

To conclude, the scope of the women's movement seems to be broader than it has been. This is especially true with the Equal Rights Amendment in the news. This would be an advancement for black and white women alike. Black women, out of necessity have always struggled for equal rights. Harriet Tubman, a slave, was an early heroine for women of

any color. We couldn't wait for white women to create a movement and finally realize that our destinies are inextricably linked. We've always been in the vanguard of the struggle for human rights and the liberation of all people.

Sharon Fuller, Olivette, Missouri

Black women in the Mennonite church are faced with sexism, but they are not faced with sexism because they are black or a member of the Mennonite church but because they are women. Sexism is the discrimination of one sex by another sex based on the assumption that one sex is superior to the other.

The Mennonite church is constructed upon the "old way." Men do things best. As a result the church (in all types of religions) is primarily run by men. As a result all women in the Mennonite church face sexism by some of their brothers. The fact that sexism exists in the church is secondary. The primary factor we must contend with is how to get rid of that discrimination. The issue for the black woman in the church is to prove herself worthy of being classified a black woman--a person full of knowledge, courage and a willingness to show and share the love God has given to her. Those positive characteristics show her brothers and sisters throughout the world that she can overcome the sexism that exists by being strong enough to do the things she is "not superior" enough to perform. When positive things are done in accordance to God's plan he will eliminate all other problems; thus is the fate of sexism in the Mennonite church.

Verbena Brown, Spelman College student from New York City.

RELATED RESOURCES

Beal, Frances M., "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." In Sisterhood is Powerful. Ed. Robin Morgan, 1970.

Davis, Lenwood G., The Black Woman in American Society. Boston, 1975. A bibliography.

Ladner, Joyce. Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman. Garden City, N.Y. 1971.

Lerner, Gerda. Black Women in White America: A Documentary History. New York, 1972.

Murray, Pauli. "The Liberation of Black Women." In Voices of the New Feminism. Ed. Mary Lou Thompson. Boston, 1970.

Norton, Eleanor Holmes. "Sadie and Maude." In Sisterhood is Powerful. Ed. Robin Morgan, 1970.

Staples, Robert. The Black Woman in America: Sex, Marriage and the Family. Chicago, 1973.

Watkins, Nel, ed. To Be a Black Woman: Portraits in Fact and Fiction. New York, 1971.

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NEWS

The Task Force on Women in Church and Society, Anna Mary Brubacher, Kitchener, Ontario; Erna Klassen, Edmonton, Alberta; Gayle Koontz, Everett, Massachusetts; Nancy S. Lapp, Albany, Oregon; Mabel Petkau, Abbotsford, British Columbia; met in Akron, Pa., in late May. Planning special events to bring women together at Mennonite World Conference was a major agenda item. A brown-bag luncheon on Thursday noon for 200 women will hopefully be a forum for exchanging "issues" confronting Mennonite women cross-culturally. A group of over 400 may attend a Wednesday night more formal banquet.

The Task Force decided to focus subsequent Reports on battered women and children, women and careers, and women and power. The group also drafted a letter to the planning committee of the Laurelville '78 symposium to be held in August, expressing concern that no women or minority persons have been asked to contribute along with the 18 men who will reflect on "The emerging shape of the eighties: a decade of transition for the world and the church. What type of leadership will we need?"

Since that time the Laurelville planning committee has invited the Task Force to submit names to replace John A. Lapp who will not be able to attend.

The Task Force members also evaluated whether or not the time had come for them to disband. The group decided their status should remain ad hoc but that while there is no other institutional space for Mennonite feminists to cooperate on an inter-Mennonite basis and while the disproportion of men to women in leadership positions remains as high as it is at present, the Task Force should continue to serve as a communication and action center.

Nancy Swartzentruber Lapp succeeds outgoing member Erna Klassen as moderator. Katie Funk Wiebe terminated as one of the three U.S. members.

* * *

Again and again we hear the phrases, "But there aren't any qualified women," "Our problem was we didn't know who the women were who could handle that assignment." The "old buddy" system operates as strongly in church politics as elsewhere and people (men, women, minority members) who stand outside that network rarely break in. It's not intentional; it's just the way it works. Until more "just" systems of searching for personnel (if there are such things) are established, we'd like to help concerned leadership find capable women. The Task Force is gathering a resource list of those invisible resources that some people fear is simply a myth. Please fill out and return the form on page 8. Copy the form and encourage other women you know to file with us. More forms are available from Akron. We are particularly interested in women who could serve in regional, conference, national, seminar, etc. leadership positions.

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VERBS . . . people in action

Special thanks to Margaret Allen, MCC Peace Section member, Dwight McFadden, Jr., Associate General Secretary of the Mennonite Church General Board, and Hubert Schwartzentruber, Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, who assisted with this issue.

Nancy K. Williams, Consultant for Development Disabilities for Mennonite Mental Health Services, has given several "talks" (sermons?) to church groups. A copy of "All in the Family" dealing with God's mother-father love is available from the Report editor.

Delphine Martin is a new youth minister in the Ontario Mennonite Conference. Delphine, mother of teens, graduated from college with a degree in psychology, took courses in clinical pastoral education in the past year and also served as conference secretary the last two years prior to this assignment.

Kansas artist Ethel Abrahams designed a print featuring wheat/bread as a gift from and by American women for women guests at the Mennonite World Conference.

Marty Kelly has been affirmed as one of three teachers within the new fellowship, Pilgrims Mennonite Church, near Ephrata, Pa. Kathleen Roth is contact person for that congregation.

Marion Preheim, Akron, Pa., is coordinator of the chaplaincy program at Ephrata Community Hospital. Thirteen local pastors are involved. Marian is also working as a researcher for a social scientist (woman!) interviewing Lancaster County Amish families about mental retardation.

Doris Longacre is compiling a More-With-Less II book on conservation of resources and simple living. Send creative ideas to Doris at Mennonite Central Committee, 21 S. 12th St., Akron, Pa, 17501, or write for a suggestion form.

An information packet on Wife Battering is available from the Women's Issues Program, American Friends Service Committee, 2161 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA, 02140. The packet contains short articles exemplifying several ways to respond. Cost of the packet is \$2.50 each, or \$3.00 by mail, with bulk rates available.

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THIRD WORLD WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES TO ATTEND MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE

The \$10,000 raised by the Women's Task Force along with matching fund from Mennonite World Conference will enable the following women to attend Mennonite World Conference, July 25-30 at Wichita, Kansas:

Africa

Metasebia Ayele, Ethiopia
Jane Kumalo, Rhodesia
Rhoda Mtoka, Tanzania
Kimbadi Kasanji, Zaire
Dolika Mwaanga, Zambia

Asia

S. Roeswatmadi and Lisa Christano, Indonesia
Noriko Matsuura and Toshiko Aratani, Japan
Maria F. Sacapano, Philippines

Central and South America

Ana Abat de Perez, Argentina
Susi Janzen de Penner, Brazil
Maria Elena Arango, Columbia
Emelina de Munson, Honduras
Ana Irma Cruz de Rosado, Puerto Rico

RESOURCE LISTING OF MENNONITE WOMEN

Women in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches today have a wide variety of skills and resources that could be used more widely with the context of the church. Mennonite women are seminary graduates, are serving in pastoral roles, have had significant overseas or domestic service experience, and are experienced as seminar leaders and retreat speakers, for example.

The boards of Mennonite church agencies, conference and seminar planning committees and other church groups or bodies often don't include women as members or participants simply because they are not aware of eligible, qualified women to fill these roles.

The MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women promotes broader inclusion of women at decision-making levels, as resource persons and in other dimensions of church life and institutional activities. We are compiling a list of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women who have such resources to offer, especially in the areas of theology, religious life and women's issues. If you would like to be included on the listing or know of someone who should, please complete the form and mail it to: Women's Task Force Resource Listing, MCC Peace Section, Akron, PA, 17501.

Name: _____ Address: _____

Church denomination: _____

Area(s) in which I am willing to serve as a resource: _____

My current occupation(s) is: _____

My educational background is: _____

My experience includes: _____

Please attach additional sheets as necessary.

PEACE ACTIVITIES AT MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE

Although no women were chosen to be major speakers at Mennonite World Conference, women will be integrally involved in MWC peace activities.

A Peace Interest Group will be one of the afternoon discussion groups meeting on Thursday and Friday, July 27 and 28, from 4:15-5:30 p.m. The meeting location for the Peace Interest Group will be the North Ballroom in the Broadview Hotel.

On the agenda for the Thursday session will be discussion of recommendations to the Mennonite World Conference plenary session on the future of the MWC peace committee and the priority of Biblical peace education, and an address by Dr. A.J. Klassen, Mennonite Brethren Theological Seminary, Fresno, CA, and chairman, MCC Peace Section on "The Use of the Bible in Peace Training in the Local Congregation." The topic for Friday afternoon will be "The Kingdom of God and the Socio-Political Situation." The following papers will be presented:

- "The Case for Resistance" by Michio Ohno, Japan
- "The Case for Cooperation" by Neftali Birai, Tanzania
- "A Critical View" by Ms. J. Kuipers-Postma, Netherlands

MCC Peace Section is also sponsoring the itineration of an International Peace Team for three weeks following world conference. Rhoda Mtoka, an American-educated African church woman and assistant principal of Buhare Homecraft Training Center, Musoma, Tanzania will be one of four team members. Other persons on the team include Paul Stuckey, an American with long-term experience in Columbia, Hans Joachim Wienss, a Mennonite from Germany, and an Asian member not yet confirmed.

The Peace Team will be in California on August 1-6, in Oregon from August 8-10, in British Columbia from August 11-16, and in Ontario from August 17-21.

The Report is a bi-monthly publication of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church And Society. Correspondence should be sent to Gayle Gerber Koontz, 27 Fairlawn St., Everett, MA 02149.

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